

TWO INCANTATION BOWLS FROM BABYLON*

By ERICA C. D. HUNTER

Babylon has been associated with incantation bowls since the first discoveries in the mid-nineteenth century. The "Rawlinson" collection of eight incantation bowls (seven were written in Aramaic and one in Mandaic) was accessioned on 9 October 1851 by the British Museum and, according to *Trustees Minutes*, had been "found in a tomb at Babylon".¹ Austin Henry Layard does not seem to have been privy to this provenance information when three of these incantation bowls were transcribed and translated in his book, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*.² Instead he claimed that the bowls from the "Rawlinson" collection were "obtained at Baghdad, where they are sometimes offered for sale by the Arabs; but it is not known from what sites they were brought."³ This misinformation has been perpetuated⁴ and no further information has come to light on the unusual findspot.⁵

Amongst the vast collections of the Iraq Museum are numerous incantation bowls from Babylon, to which IM 9726 can now be added (Fig. 1). The entry in the Register of the Iraq Museum, dated 1927/1928, is scant, not even mentioning the script of the bowl: "Bowl with Incantation Text. Baked clay 12.5 x 6.5 [cm]. Presented by Mey Marian". Thirteen years later, Cyrus Gordon included IM 9726 in his resumé of international collections of incantation bowls that appeared in the 1941 issue of *Orientalia*.⁶ It was one of the eleven incantation bowls Gordon recorded from the Iraq Museum collection, which he noted "has increased considerably since my last visit to Baghdad in 1935" and which he correctly predicted "should eventually become the largest and the best".⁷ However, Gordon, who noted that IM 9726 had nine lines of Aramaic, only presented excerpts of its text.⁸ He did not supply any photograph or drawing of this incantation bowl nor any other information.

A complete translation of IM 9726 can now be offered arising from the author's researches in the Iraq Museum. This has far-reaching ramifications, not the least since various scholars, including Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, have been dependent on Gordon's partial translation of IM 9726.⁹ Markham Geller also used Gordon in his 1986 publication of an incantation bowl (which

* The author thanks the British School of Archaeology in Iraq for financial assistance in order to research the collection of incantation bowls in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad; also the erstwhile Director-General of the State Organization for Culture and Heritage, Republic of Iraq, Dr Mu'ayyid Sa'id Damerji, for his generous assistance at all times; and finally, Professor J. B. Segal for his advice on the reading of IM 9726.

¹ British Museum, *Trustees Minutes* 1848–52, 362–3.

² See A. H. Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (London 1853) 514–19, for Texts II (BM 91716), III (BM 91720) and IV (BM 91726).

³ Layard, *op. cit.*, 509.

⁴ J. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia 1913) 16. Also M. Geller, "Eight incantation bowls", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 17 (1986) 104, where he states "purchased in Baghdad".

⁵ Montgomery, *op. cit.*, 13–14, noted their occurrence in the ruins of houses at Nippur, but mentions that, at least in one case, bowls were found in connection with a cemetery. Quoting the account of Professor John Peters, the leader of the University of Pennsylvania expeditions to Nippur in 1888–9, Montgomery writes, "we found ourselves in a graveyard ... It was interesting to find, between one and two metres below the surface, in immediate neighbourhood of slipper-shaped coffins, inscribed Hebrew bowls." He may have confused the stratigraphy of Nippur. Area WG, the

source of the forty incantation bowls which Montgomery translated, is contiguous to the Parthian "Villa with a Court of Columns" complex which was investigated in 1889 by the University of Pennsylvania expedition. The slipper-shaped coffins would appear to be Parthian, whilst the chronology of incantation bowls is Late Sasanian. To date there is no excavated evidence for the usage of incantation bowls in a funerary context. For incantation bowls from the eighteenth season of excavation at Nippur (WG area) see Erica C. D. Hunter, "Two Mandaic incantation bowls from Nippur", *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 25 (1994) 605–18. The tenth season of excavation at Tell Baruda by the University of Turin *Centro Scavi* discovered several incantation bowls buried in a courtyard. See R. Venco Ricciardi, "Trial trench at Tell Baruda", *Mesopotamia* 8–9 (1973/4) 19. The texts have been published by Fulvio Franco, "Five Aramaic incantation bowls from Tell Baruda (Choche)", *Mesopotamia* 13–14 (1978/9) 233.

⁶ Cyrus Gordon, "Aramaic incantation bowls", *Orientalia* 10 (1941) 116–41, 272–84, 339–60.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁸ All of ll. 1–2 and 9 and parts of ll. 3–5 and 8: *ibid.*, 348–9.

⁹ J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantation Texts from Late Antiquity* (Leiden 1985) 132–45 (Bowl B), specifically 136.

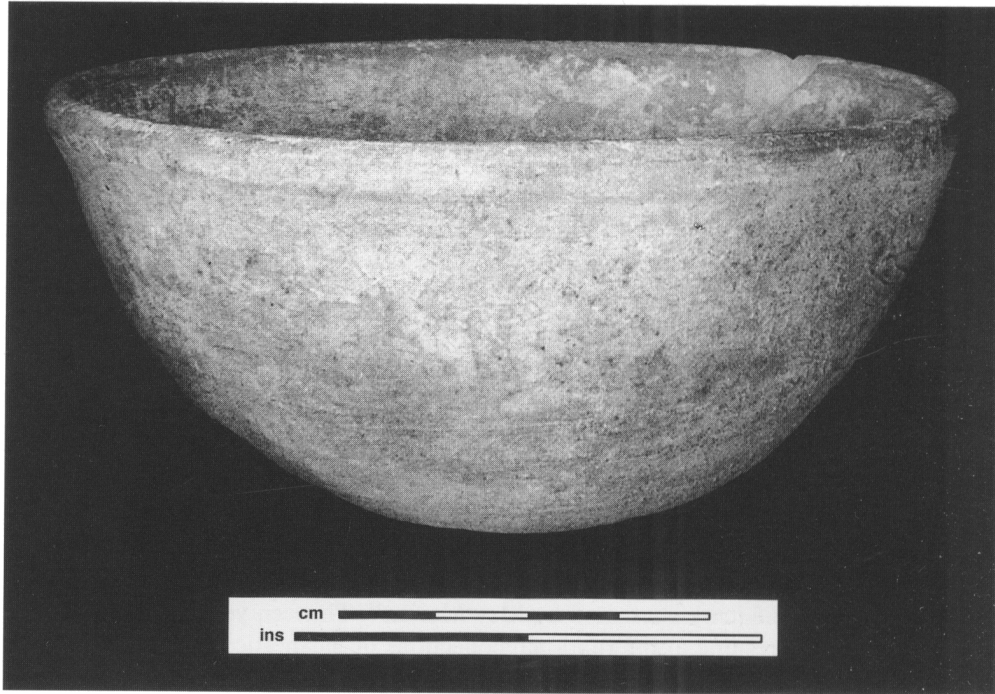


Fig. 1 IM 9726 incantation bowl.

he termed “Pearson”) that is now housed in a small collection at St Albans, England (Fig. 2).¹⁰ Since IM 9726 is a duplicate of the Pearson bowl, Geller’s readings can now be revised in light of the full text (Figs. 3–4). Comparative studies of the two incantation bowls, complemented by their physical typology, palaeography and decorative conventions, not only indicate that the Pearson bowl and IM 9726 were written by the same practitioner and share the same provenance, but also shed insight into the praxis of writing incantation texts and their usage in ritual.

*Transliteration of IM 9726 (Fig. 3)*¹¹

- (1) hpyk hpykh {’r’} ’r’h hpykh šyq’ hpykh ’wpykh lwtt’ dkl bny
- (2) ’ynšh ’wpykh lwtt’ d’ym’ wbrt’ dkl’t’ wḥmwt’ drḥqt’ wqrbt’ dqqym’ bdbrrh
- (3) wqyym’ bmt’ qqym’ bdbrrh mlth rkbh ’l ’ph šqph bpwmh lwty’ ’wpykh lwtt’ d’ym’ wbt’ym’
- (4) wdmndyr wlwt’ wšdr ’l ’ḥtby bt mḥlpt’ mn špnh wym’ mn ṭwr mydnh wbšwm nkyr nkyr
nkyr ngyl ngyl ngyl
- (5) nqm nqm nqmyt wbšwm dyybrh ml’kh d’yt lh ḥd’ šr {š} šmyn s[psk]h spskh spskh sryh sryh
sryh pgpgpg
- (6) brbr bbr kybyby bnwr’ ’wpykh lwtt’ d’ym’ wbt’ym’w wql brbl blyly ql trngl bnghy qlh d’ym’
wbt’wym’w qdḥ šnp ylyly
- (7) wtwb qdḥ šnp ylyl wtwb qdḥ šnp ylyl qdḥ thbh tysq ylylth bršh tysq ḥršhyn qdmyn lndrh
w’ysrh mytqryn yyrwry klhwn yytyn {wyh} wytmyryn lmšrw
- (8) nydwry d’ḥtby bt mḥlpt’ {’h’y ’ḥtb<y>dw bt mḥlpt’} šlwm nyhy l’lm ’mn ’mn slḥ bšḥdthwn
dhnyy šby[’]y dqlb ’ymy wbt’ym’y wnydyry wlwt’ wšyqpyyt’ {w’lš} w’šlmt’
- (9) mn ywm’ dnn wl’lm ’mn ’mnsllḥ

¹⁰ Geller, op. cit., 102–5, together with a photograph (Plate IV). The author examined the Pearson bowl at the headquarters of Church’s Ministry among Jewish People on 29 June 1999. She thanks Mr James Stedeford for his assistance in viewing the incantation bowl and also Dr

Irving Finkel, Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities, British Museum, for supplying the address of this society.

¹¹ Sigla: {n} = dittography, <y> = supra-linear character, [yt] = reconstructed text.



Fig. 2 The Pearson incantation bowl.

Translation

- (1) Overturned, overturned is {the earth}, the earth. Overturned is the *šyq'*-demon. Overturned, overturned is the curse of all
- (2) mankind. Overturned is the curse of the mother and daughter, and the daughter-in-law, and mother-in-law, of the distant one and near one who is standing in the open field
- (3) and is standing in the village (and) standing in the open field. Kneeling on her knees. Striking upon her face. Cursing with her mouth. Overturned is the curse of the mother and the daughter
- (4) which is vowed and cursed and sent against 'ḪBTY daughter of MḪPT' from the north of the day, from the mountain of the east. In the name of NKYR, NKYR, NKYR, NGYL, NGYL, NGYL,
- (5) NQM, NQM, NQMYT, and in the name of YYBRH who has eleven names: S[PSK]H, SPSKH, SPSKH, SDYH, SDYH, SDYH, PGPGPG, BRBR, BBR,
- (6) KYBYBY, BNWRH. Overturned is the curse of the mother and the daughter of the mother. And the voice of the nightingale at night and the voice of the cock at daybreak. The voice of the mother and the daughter of the mother wailed, screamed, howled
- (7) and again wailed, screamed, howled and again wailed, screamed, howled. Called, repeated, "it will cease, the curse on her head will cease." The sorcerers in the presence of her vow and bond are calling out, "all those howlers will come and are appointed to dissolve
- (8) the vows of 'ḪBTY the daughter of MḪPT', {'Ḫ} 'ḪBTYDW the daughter of MḪPT'. May there be peace forever. Amen, Amen, Selah." By the testimony of those [on oath] before the mother and the daughter of the mother
- (9) the vows, the curse, the knocking and the spell from this day, forever. Amen. Amen. Selah.

Commentary

- (1). {'r'} "{'the earth}'". Dittography absent in the Pearson bowl.
hyphykh 'wpykh lwt' "overturned, overturned is the curse". Cf. Gordon 2: *hyphykh hyphykh lwt'* "upset, upset is the curse" and Pearson 2: *hyphykh 'wpykh 'wpykh lwt'* "the destruction is reversed, reversed is the curse". Geller has referred to Gordon's transliteration (which he has incorrectly designated as IM 97826)



Fig. 3 IM 9726, text.

when commenting that *hpykh* “destruction” appears to be a nominal form. He interprets *'wpykh* as passive, perhaps resembling the *Afel* form and offers the suggestion that it might be either a *Hofal* or, as in Biblical Aramaic, a corrupt *Ite'al*. Instead the combination *hpykh 'wpykh* indicates the usage of *Hafel* alongside *Afel* as occasionally occurs in incantation texts.¹² On both occasions *'wpykh* introduces a genitive construction and may be an emphatic or stylistic device. Rudolf Macuch, discussing Mandaic words where the initial etymological ה or ח vanished and only the vowel remained, noted Talmudic Aramaic אפך and Jewish Aramaic הפך.¹³ Both forms survived in Mandaic, where √APK is a doublet of √HPK.¹⁴

šyq' “*šyq'*-demon”. Montgomery, op. cit., Text 15: 5, translated this word as “goblin”. Geller states that *šyq'* and *šyd'* are synonyms.

(3). *brykh rkbh* “kneeling upon his knees”. Geller has read Pearson 3: *bdwkh wbbh* “in a place and in the gate”, continuing the concept of location in l. 2: *bdbrh ... bmt' ... bdbrh* “in the open field ... in the village ... in the open field”. Geller’s reading can be reconsidered as palaeographically there is little to distinguish *bdwkh* from *brykh*. Similarly, his reading *wbbh* is unconvincing since the shape of the initial letter of the second word recommends a Resh rather than a Waw.

¹² See Hannu Juusola, *Linguistic Peculiarities in the Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts* (Helsinki 1999) 153, for reference to instances of the *Hafel* and *Afel* in incantation texts.

¹³ R. Macuch, *Handbook of Classical and Modern*

Mandaic (Berlin 1965) 82. Both forms appear to have survived in Mandaic.

¹⁴ E. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford 1962) 31.

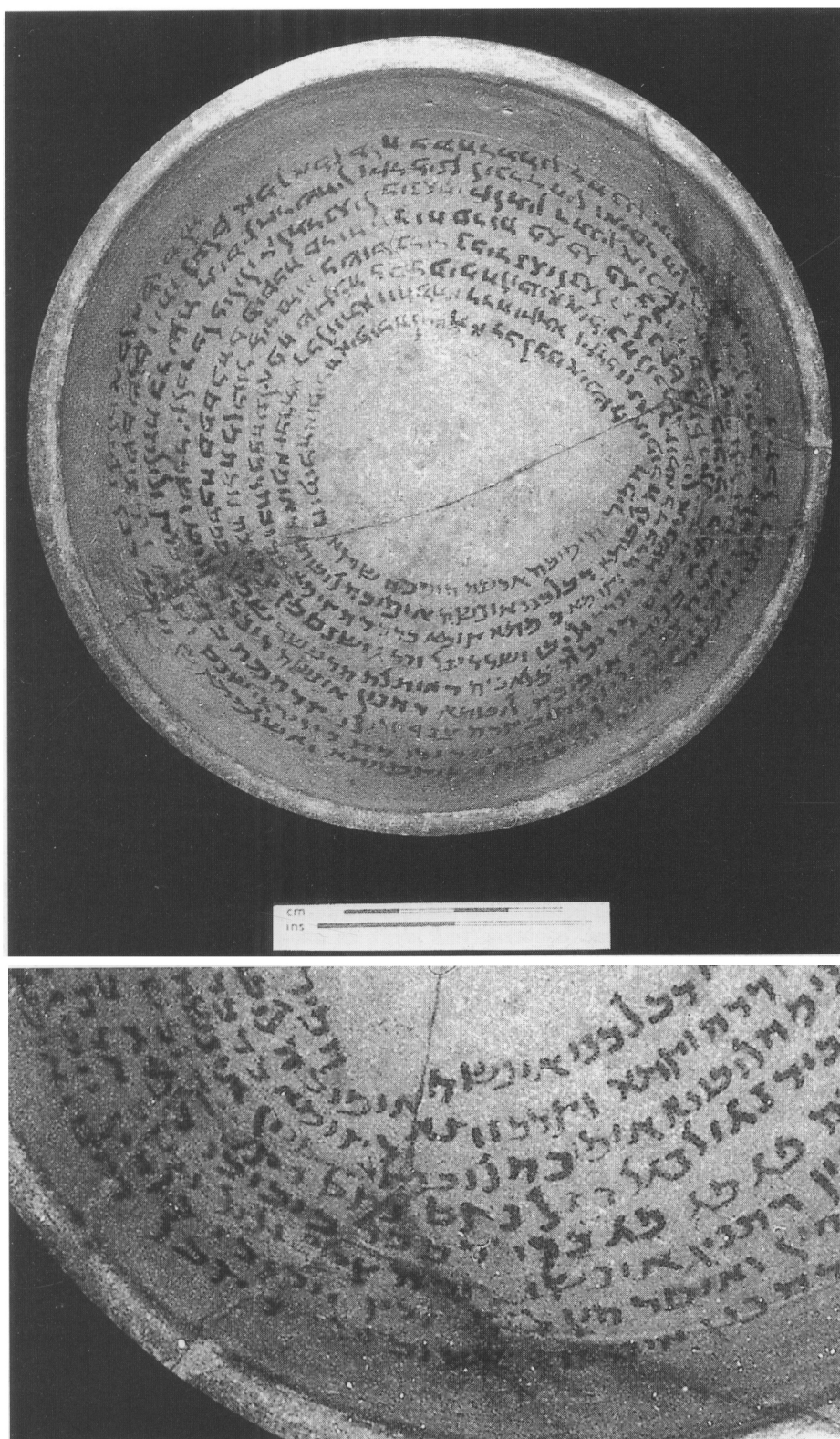


Fig. 4 The Pearson bowl, text and detail.

Therefore I must mourn and lament . . . must howl like the jackals.

This most interesting passage sheds further light on the etymology of 𐤀𐤕𐤁𐤀 in that it originally denoted a type of mourner, *ywrwry* “howlers”, whose onomatopoeic cries simulated those of jackals and, as the *Acta* of St Simeon Stylites suggests, were still known in late Antiquity.

lndrh “her vow”. Geller has read Pearson 8: *lndrhwn* “according to their vow”. On palaeographic grounds, the second and third characters read Yodh-Nun respectively, in an occurrence of Yodh indicating *Shwa* with the inseparable preposition Lamedh.²⁵

w'ysrh “her bond”. Pearson 8: *w'ysrhwn* “and their bond”.

mytqryn “are calling out”. Geller has translated Pearson 8: *lytqryn* “call out”. Only the final four characters of Pearson can be read since the incantation bowl has been physically damaged, but the oblique stroke of the initial letter might be Lamadh or equally Mem, and on the basis of IM 9726 the transliteration should be amended to *[myt]qryn*.

(8). *'h'y* “{’h}”. Pearson 8: has *w'l'y* “upon him”, which Geller suggests is defective for *'lwhy*. {’h’y} is a dittography since the first two characters, Alaph-He are those of the following proper name and the scribe has already shown in several places a tendency to repeat misspelt words.

'mn 'mn “Amen, Amen”. Geller has translated three amens, as he also does in the final line of the incantation, but his transcription of Pearson is accurate in only listing two.

The dynamics of IM 9726 and the Pearson bowl

The provenance of IM 9726 is not recorded in the register of the Iraq Museum. More information is available for the Pearson bowl. A hand-written note accompanying it states, “Babylon inscribed bowl in Hebrew Chaldee-Early Aramaic”.²⁶ It reiterates the claim of its erstwhile owner, the Rev. Leonard Pearson, that “it was found, together with a few others, by Hormuzd Rassam in Babylon.”²⁷ Geller has queried such an association, wondering whether “Babylon” has been been loosely applied.²⁸ However, Robert Koldewey mentioned the occurrence of numerous Aramaic incantation bowls in the upper layers, particularly in the Merkes residential area.²⁹ The aforementioned “Rawlinson” incantation bowls are reputed to have come from Babylon and two incantation bowls from Birs Nimrud in the British Museum collection are associated with Rassam, although they are not listed in his excavation inventories from Tell Ibrahim al-Khalil.³⁰ Rassam may have found other incantation bowls at Babylon but failed to make any note of them. In the light of these circumstances, the benefit of doubt about provenance can be given to the Pearson bowl and also extended to IM 9726.

Moreover, IM 9726 and the Pearson bowl are an identical pair. Their physical typology suggests that they were selected from a batch of Sasanian utilitarian plainware at a local pottery workshop.³¹ Both are hemispherical bowls with simple rims, and have similar dimensions, the ratio of height to width (2:1) classifying them as “cups”.³² The palaeography of both incantation bowls, where nine lines of text have been written in a spiral from the interior centre to the rim edge in a script typical of Aramaic incantation bowls, points to them being the product of the same copyist.³³ The decorative conventions of IM 9726 and the Pearson bowl are distinct since both lack the “inner” and “outer” circles, i.e. the single lines drawn at the interior centre and rim edge that are an almost ubiquitous feature of incantation bowls.³⁴ Finally, the language of Pearson and IM 9726 is characteristic of the vernacular idiom in which incantation bowls were written that Tapani

²⁵ Cf. Montgomery, op. cit., 30; Naveh and Shaked, op. cit., 32; Rossell, op. cit., 14, 20; and most recently Juusola, op. cit., 44.

²⁶ A second hand has added the incorrect description, “?Prayer for the Healing of the Sick 600 BC”.

²⁷ L. Pearson, *Through the Land of Babylonia* (London 1939, 1951) 83. A plate of the bowl is on the facing unpaginated page.

²⁸ Geller, op. cit., 102, quoting Pearson.

²⁹ R. Koldewey, *Das wieder erstehende Babylon* (Leipzig 1914) 242.

³⁰ J. Reade, “Rassam’s excavations at Borsippa and Kutha, 1879–1882”, *Iraq* 48 (1986) 112.

³¹ For the relationship of incantation bowls to Sasanian

pottery, see the discussion in J. B. Segal (with a contribution by Erica C. D. Hunter), *Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London 2000) 170.

³² See the Appendix, Figs. 5–6.

³³ Palaeographic samples are found in the Appendix. See A. Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy and Design* (Jerusalem 1997) 206–8, for the script of incantation bowls from the “Byzantine period” and a chart of stylized letter-forms.

³⁴ For further discussion of the “inner” and “outer” circles and their application in incantation bowls see Hunter’s contribution in Segal, op. cit., 173.

Harviainen termed Eastern Aramaic *koiné*.³⁵ However, minor orthographic variants, including the tendency of the Pearson bowl to indicate *Shwa* by *Yodh*, highlight the copyist's vagaries.³⁶

The Pearson bowl and IM 9726 were written for male and female clients respectively: *YZYD GWŠNS* and *ʿHBTY bt MHLPT*.³⁷ In a possible response to the male sexuality of its client, the copyist of Pearson has made a series of changes to the incantation text:

(1) *ʿwpykh lwīt dhnyn ʿynšh dyndr wltw wšdr* "overturned is the curse of these men which is vowed, cursed and bound". Cf. IM 9726 3: *ʿwpykh lwīt dʿym wbtʿymʿw* "overturned is the curse of the mother and the daughter".

(2) *qlhwn dhnyn ʿynšy qrh šnp ylw* "the voice of these men cries, shrieks and wails." This clause is feminine in IM 9726 6: *qlh dʿym wbt ʿwymʿw qdḥ šnp ylwly* "the voice of the mother and the daughter of the mother cries, shrieks, wails."

(3) *bšhdthwn dhnyn ʿynšy* "in the testimony of these men". Cf. IM 9726 8: *bšhdthwn dhnyn šby[ʿ]y dqlb dʿym wbtʿymʿw* "by the testimony of those [on oath] before the mother and the daughter of the mother" in the closing clauses of the incantation.

These deliberate alterations by the copyist highlight the individualistic tailoring of incantation texts.³⁸ On a wider canvas, the idiosyncracies of IM 9726 and the Pearson bowl elucidate the dynamics of writing and the praxis of the bowls. Supra-linear insertions, dittography and the misspelling of the client's name highlight the copyist's carelessness that is probably due to haste in writing the texts.³⁹ Corrupt readings indicate the copyist's unfamiliarity with the *Vorlage* of Refrain A, suggesting deterioration in its transmission history.⁴⁰ Irrespectively, these textual defects do not appear to have affected the incantation's efficacy, in the same way that many incantation bowls have physical flaws. Instead, they intimate that, over and above the written formulae, the recitation of the text was paramount, this possibly taking place as the bowl was being buried 'overturned' in a symbolic action against the demons which, as Gordon has pointed out, "is expressed in the bowl-texts themselves".⁴¹

APPENDIX: *Physical description of IM 9726 and the Pearson bowl*

IM 9726 (examined 9 April 1989, Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Iraq)

Complete (unbroken) hemispherical bowl, with a simple rim that is chipped in one place. Dimensions 13.6 × 6.5 cm with a ratio of 2:1. The exterior surface is pink (MUNSELL 5YR 7/3). The fabric has an occasional vegetable inclusion as well as a common and evenly distributed mica inclusion. No slip or glaze has been applied to this bowl, which is wheel thrown with several rilling marks. The exterior wall is partly shaved.

³⁵ T. Harviainen, "An Aramaic incantation bowl from Borsippa. Another specimen of Eastern Aramaic 'Koiné'", *Studia Orientalia* 51:14 (1981) 23.

³⁶ Montgomery, op. cit., 30; Naveh and Shaked, op. cit., 32; Rossell, op. cit., 14, 20; and Juusola, op. cit., 44. Cf. IM 9726 *dklt* : Pearson *dklyyt* "daughter-in-law"; *rḥqt* : *rḥyqt* "the distant one"; *qrbt* : *qrbyt* "near one"; *qym* : *qym* "standing"; *šqph* : *šqyph* "struck"; *špnh* : *špwnh* "north"; *mydnh* : *mydnh* "east"; *blyly* : *bylyly* "by night"; *bnghy* : *byngy* "at daybreak"; *qdmyn* : *wqdmynn* "in the presence"; *šlwm* : *šlm* "peace".

³⁷ *Mahlapta* is a name common to both Aramaic and Mandaic incantation bowls. See Erica C. D. Hunter, "Two Mandaic incantation bowls from Nippur", *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 25 (1994), for a female client named *Mahlapta* and n. 11 for the name in other Mandaic specimens. Aramaic incantation bowls with the name *Mahlapta* include Montgomery, op. cit., Texts 17, 19 and 24. Naveh and Shaked, op. cit., 135, cite what appears to be the male counterpart, *Mahlepa* (מחלפא), although this appellation has been incorrectly listed in the volume's index as מחלפא.

³⁸ Scribal improvisation also occurs in a group of duplicate Aramaic incantation bowls from Nippur, particularly in their opening and closing formulae; see Erica C. D. Hunter, "Combat and conflict in incantation bowls: Studies on two Aramaic specimens from Nippur" in M. J. Geller, J. C. Greenfield and M. P. Weitzman (eds.), *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches* (Oxford 1995) 61–75, esp. 64–5.

³⁹ Erica C. D. Hunter, "A scroll amulet from Kurdistan", *ARAM* 5 (1993) 246, details scribal errors in an amulet dated to the nineteenth century AD, where the client's matronym has been substituted throughout the entire text.

⁴⁰ For further discussion of Refrain A see Erica C. D. Hunter, "Excursions in Refrain A", *BSOAS* (forthcoming).

⁴¹ Cyrus H. Gordon, "The Aramaic incantation bowls in historic perspective" in M. Fishbane and M. Brettler (eds.), *Minhah le Nahum. Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum B. Sarna in Honour of his 70th Birthday* (Sheffield 1993) 142. The author wishes to thank Professor Gordon for sending her an offprint of this article.

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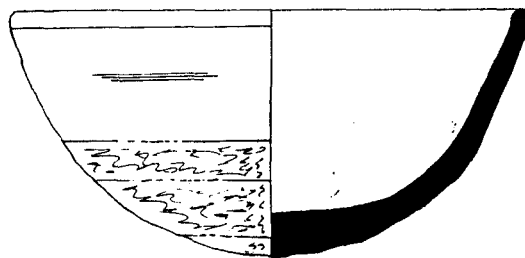


Fig. 5 IM 9726, palaeographic sample [scale 1:1] and profile [scale 1:2].

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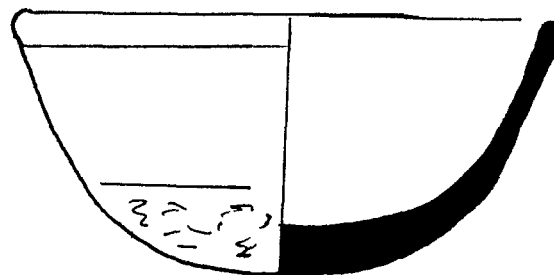


Fig. 6 The Pearson bowl, palaeographic sample [scale 1:1] and profile [scale 1:2].

The Pearson bowl (Church's Ministry Amongst Jewish People, St Albans, England)

Incomplete hemispherical bowl, with a simple rim. The specimen has been pieced together from four sherds and repaired with five metal staples. Dimensions 14.0 × 6.8 cm with a ratio of 2:1. The exterior surface is light brown (MUNSELL 7YR 8/3) with a fine/medium fabric. No slip or glaze has been applied to this bowl, which is wheel thrown with several rilling marks. The exterior wall is shaved 11.5 cm from the base.